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Source: *Folklore*, Vol. 55, No. 1 (Mar., 1944), pp. 22-27

Published by: [Taylor & Francis, Ltd.](#) on behalf of [Folklore Enterprises, Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1257625>

Accessed: 25/05/2013 15:16

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MUGWORT LORE

BY EDWARD A. ARMSTRONG

THE plant called mugwort (*Artemisia vulgaris* L.) which grows on waste land and hedge banks in Great Britain is nothing regarded nowadays but was once able to arouse a host of strange ideas, magical conceptions and sacred associations amongst our forefathers. It is not pretty, nor even conspicuous, and it is remarkable that it should ever have attained to fame and sanctity. The stems are about three feet high and it produces purplish flowers in August. Probably its slightly aromatic scent was the characteristic which first aroused man's attention and initiated the process of building up an ideology of considerable magnitude in connexion with this weed.

Mugwort is usually regarded as a native plant but there are so many parts of the British Isles where it is met with under suspicious conditions that doubts arise as to whether it is really indigenous. The writers of a considerable number of county floras consider that it may have been introduced in times long past. It is quite often found near houses in circumstances which suggest that at one time it was cultivated. As it had, as we shall see, a high medicinal reputation, it is not surprising that this was the case. Taking all the evidence into consideration I think it very probable that artemisia was one of the first herbs cultivated by man and that he took roots of it with him on his travels. I consider that anthropological evidence is against, rather than in favour of, the plant being indigenous in Britain.

In the Isle of Man, where mugwort was called *Bollan feaill-Eoin* "John's feast-wort," it was gathered on Midsummer Eve "as a preventive against the influence of witchcraft" and placed in chaplets on the heads of man and beast to ward off evil influences.¹ In France, where it is also called after the Midsummer Day Saint, it is worn to prevent aches and pains.² In Germany the people had like customs and eventually threw the girdles and crowns of mugwort into the Midsummer fire. In East Prussia it was used for divination.³ At Midsummer *Artemisia alba* is used as a fumigant in Morocco.⁴

These beliefs and practices are of very ancient origin. The mugwort lore in the herbalists Gerarde, Parkinson and Culpeper was derived from Dioscorides, Apuleius and Pliny, but the plant was a herb to conjure with long before any of these writers lived. Probably Stone Age magicians used it in their rites.

What is the likelihood that a dingy weed should be chosen for special

¹ J. Train, *Historical and Statistical Account of the Isle of Man*, II, 240. It has several Welsh names including *Bydiog lwyd* "the grey herb giving life" and *Llysiau Ifan* "John's herb." I owe this information and notes of the plant's distribution to Mr. A. A. Dallman.

² A. de Gubernatis, *Mythologie des Plantes*, I, 189.

³ J. Grimm, *Deutsche Mythologie*, III, 356 f.

⁴ E. Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco*, II, 185.

honour independently in various places throughout the world? The chances that men in widely separated places should select mugwort independently as a magical herb are remote; the possibility that in more than one locality they should not only choose it from amongst all other plants but also attach to it the same magical qualities is completely out of the question. We may confidently believe, therefore, that mugwort was selected as having magical properties thousands of years ago and that the lore connected with it was passed on from community to community round the world. This humble hedgerow plant testifies to the un-inventiveness of early man's mind and adds a substantial weight of evidence to the view that culture spread much more through the diffusion of ideas than by means of independent discovery in more than one place. Mythologies enshrine an important historical fact when they attribute beneficial inventions to one man such as Osiris in Egypt or Triptolemos in Greece.

Let us compare Chinese beliefs about mugwort with European ideas. Amongst the inhabitants of the Middle Kingdom the herb was considered to have magical potency from the earliest times of which we have record. There is a reference to it as one of the weeds which had to be destroyed before people could settle in China.⁵ The Odes are undoubtedly very early and contain veiled reminiscences of quite primitive practices. In one of them, an invitation to transcendent beings "in the respectful hope of a meeting," there are the words "we burn some fat mixed with mugwort," indicating that the herb was used in worship and probably was believed to have some efficacy in conjuring up the appearance of divinities.⁶ It is also recorded in the Odes that:

The reverent ladies of the palace go out to gather the *artemisia* and duckweed which grow by the ponds and shallow pools. They bring the weeds home in their baskets, and in their tripods they boil them and make them into dishes for the sacrifice in the ancestral temple.⁷

An old Chinese calendar notes:

On the Fifth day of the Fifth month the four classes of the people gambol in the herbage and have competitive games with plants of all kinds. They pluck mugwort and make dolls of it, which they suspend over their gates and doors in order to expel poisonous airs or influences.⁸

Herbs picked on the "Double Fifth"—that is, the summer solstice—are believed to be particularly potent. Medicinal remedies should be compounded on that day.⁹

⁵ *Tso chuan*. Tr. Couvreur, III, 267.

⁶ *Odes: Hsin-nan-shan*; J. Ross, *Original Religion of China*, p. 202; L. Wiegner, *A History of the Religious Beliefs and Philosophical Opinions in China from the beginning to the present time* (Hsien-hsien, 1927) Tr. E. C. Werner, pp. 54, 287.

⁷ J. Ross, *loc. cit.*

⁸ J. J. M. de Groot, *The Religious System of China* (Leyden, 1910) VI, 947, 1079.

⁹ L. Hodous, *Folkways of China* (London, 1929) pp. 126-7, 130 f. In the Gobi desert a bunch of *Artemisia annua* is nailed on the doors on the Double Fifth. Cf. M. Cable and F. French, *The Gobi Desert* (1943) p. 103.

It is still a common custom on the Double Fifth for the Chinese householder to fasten on each side of the main door of his house a small bunch of mugwort and sweet flag tied with a red paper band. These herbs should be picked before dawn and their purpose is to ward off disease and evil spirits which proceed from the female principle Yin. Their strong odour represents the Yang, or male principle. On the lintel are affixed effigies of the so-called Taoist Pope, Celestial Sage or Thunder God, Chang T'ien Shih, with his thunder weapon, or a representation of a monk holding a mosquito brush with which he is able to waft away noxious vapours and evil influences. A common proverb says: "On the Fifth day of the Fifth month at noon the Celestial Sage rides on the mugwort tiger."¹⁰ There is a belief that at this season when the Yang attains its culmination the five spirits of poison appear. The Chinese regard poison as excess of Yang. Harmony is attainable by means of a balanced relationship between Yin and Yang, and Chinese Magic, like Confucian philosophy, is dominated by the conviction of the undesirability of extremes. When the Dragon Boat Festival is held at the Double Fifth sprigs of mugwort are hung from the eaves of the houses. According to the records this Festival dates at least as far back as Chou times¹¹ but there can be little doubt that it is an extremely ancient solstitial ceremony, designed, like so many sports and competitions the world over, to propitiate or augment the powers of the sun.¹²

Whatever inherent efficacy might be attributed to mugwort it was essential to pluck it at Midsummer when light and fire are at their zenith.¹³ In Chinese surgery the plant was used for cauterization¹⁴ and it is also employed medicinally to cure gout.¹⁵ During the ordination ceremony of Buddhist monks small balls of dried and greased artemisia are placed on the heads of the aspirants and burned so that permanent scars are left on the scalp.¹⁶

Not only in China but all over Asia mugwort was, and still is, a herb of magical potency. The Ainu of Japan make mugwort images which they thrust upside down into holes in order to bring misfortune upon their enemies.¹⁷ In ancient China mugwort images were also made on the Double Fifth. Infusions of the herb were taken as a beverage in China.¹⁸ and it is much eaten in spring by the Ainu.¹⁹ Mugwort was eaten in

¹⁰ A. Grainger, *Studies in Chinese Life* (Chengtu, 1921) p. 52.

¹¹ E. C. Werner, *Descriptive Sociology of the Chinese*, p. 179.

¹² Sir J. Frazer, G.B.³, X, 160 ff.; XI, 290 ff.

¹³ J. J. M. de Groot, *op. cit.*, VI, 947.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 946; J. F. Davis, *The Chinese* (London, 1844) III, 51.

¹⁵ H. A. Giles, *cit.* in R. Harris, *The Ascent of Olympus* (Manchester, 1917) p. 86; J. F. Davis, *loc. cit.*

¹⁶ J. Doolittle, *Social Life of the Chinese* (London, 1866) II, 54. L. Reichelt, *Truth and Tradition in Chinese Buddhism* (Shanghai, 1927), p. 246.

¹⁷ J. Batchelor, *The Ainu and their Folklore* (London, 1901), pp. 329 f.

¹⁸ M. Granet, *Danses et Légendes de la Chine Ancienne* (Paris, 1926) II, 532.

¹⁹ J. Batchelor, *op. cit.*, p. 199.

Scotland comparatively recently and was considered to be a cure for consumption. There was a rhyme, attributed to a mermaid :

If they wad drink nettles in March
And eat muggons in May,
Sae mony braw maidens
Wad na gang to clay.²⁰

In Annam bunches of mugwort are hung up in houses at the New Year ²¹ and in Ceylon it is an important item in the native pharmacopoeia. Its use in India is undoubtedly very ancient.²² Gmelin recorded that a species of mugwort was employed to propitiate evil spirits by the Tartars ²³ and Georgi stated :

The pine tree, a kind of mugwort and the ivy of Kamschatka are the plants consecrated to the gods and their scent is agreeable to them ; that is why they decorate their idols and their victims with these plants.²⁴

The special interest of this mugwort lore is that not only is the herb regarded as having a magic potency throughout Europe and Asia but there is a point for point identity of ideas in regard to it in East and West. Moreover these conceptions can be traced so far back in time that there is no possibility that they are due to recent facilities of travel and communication.

We have seen that it is at the Summer Solstice that mugwort is gathered and used in China. In Europe belief and practice in this matter are identical. The Chinese say it deters devils. Cockayne's *Anglo-Saxon Leechdoms* comments, "It puts to flight devil-sickness" (Demoniac possession). The same work, quoting from Apuleius, says that it should be hung over the door of the house—exactly as is done to this day in China and Annam. In Baden a bride puts artemisia in her shoe and a blossom of the plant on the wedding table ²⁵ and in China artemisia, peony and pomegranate are among the flowers given to a bride.²⁶ The Chinese put artemisia in the water of the baby's first bath ²⁷ while in the *Hortus Sanitatis*, published in Mainz in 1491, we read :

Ut infantem hilarem facias incende et suffumigabis et omnes malorum averte . et hilariorum faciet infantem . nervorum dolorem et tumorem trita cum oleo bene subacta mirifice sanat.

Sosibius, quoted by Clement of Alexandria, mentions an Artemis Podagra which cures gout. We have already noticed that artemisia is prescribed

²⁰ R. Chambers, *Popular Rhymes* (London and Edinburgh, n.d.) p. 331.

²¹ P. Giran, *Magie et Religion Annamites* (Paris, 1912) pp. 118, 185, 256.

²² J. Attygalle, *Sinhalese Materia Medica* (Colombo, 1917), p. 102.

²³ J. G. Gmelin, *Flora Sibirica*, II, 24.

²⁴ J. G. Georgi, *Beschreibung aller Nationen des russischen Reichs* (S. Petersburg, 1776).

²⁵ A. Wuttke, *Der Deutsche Aberglaube* (2nd edn. Berlin, 1869), p. 133.

²⁶ G. Doré, *Researches into Chinese Superstitions*, V, 302, 646, 732.

²⁷ N. Waln, *The House of Exile* (London, n. d.), p. 99.

for gout in China. Pliny mentions it as a prophylactic against traveller's fatigue.²⁸ Mugwort we have seen to be associated with the thunder god in China; according to A. de Nore wreaths of mugwort are believed to furnish protection against thunder and thieves in France.²⁹

There are goddesses associated with mugwort in Europe, the Far East and in Mexico. The goddess Ho Hsien Ku in China, who is called Kosinko in Japan, is depicted as a young woman clothed in mugwort, holding a lotus stem and flower, and talking to a Fêng Huang, the so-called Chinese phoenix.³⁰ The Mexican god Tlaloc, who was a thunder god, and his consort Chalchihuitlicue were both associated with artemisia. The district of Tlalocan where he was believed to hold sway was called "Place of the Mugwort"³¹ while the goddess dwelt on a mountain called Yauhqueme, meaning "Covered with Mugwort."³² Here a child was sacrificed to her.³³ It will be remembered that Artemis dwelt on Mount Taygetus where artemisia grew. In Morocco *Artemisia alba* is hung inside doorways to keep snakes away³⁴ while at one of Tlaloc's festivals live water snakes were swallowed. Chalchihuitlicue was sometimes represented as a frog; jadeite was associated with her and the pearl with her husband. In China jade is sacred and the pearl is closely connected with the dragon. The pattern of ideas associated with mugwort in America is so similar to that in Eurasia that the onus of proof lies upon those who would maintain that it does not provide evidence of culture borrowing.

Artemis was apparently a northern goddess but her cult was more widely spread than that of any other Hellenic goddess.³⁵ It bore traces of being early and primitive for amongst its practices were holocausts of living birds and beasts.³⁶ She was associated with maternity and child-birth, and according to Euripides would not speak to childless women.³⁷ Moreover, she had a good deal to do with witchcraft.³⁸ Dr. Rendel Harris has maintained that Artemis and her brother Apollo are both witch doctors and that they evolved from the mugwort and the apple respectively. The magical medicine used by the priest, priestess or shaman confers strange powers upon him or her. The plant is projected into a deity and eventually personified.³⁹

²⁸ H. N., XXVI, 89.

²⁹ A. de Nore, *Coutumes, Mythes et Traditions des Provinces de France* (Paris and Lyons, 1846), p. 262.

³⁰ H. L. Joly, *Legend in Japanese Art* (1908) p. 165.

³¹ L. Spence, *The Gods of Mexico* (1937) p. 256.

³² D. A. Mackenzie, *Myths of Pre-Columbian America* (1924) pp. 201, 111.

³³ L. Spence, *op. cit.*, p. 261.

³⁴ E. Westermarck, *Ritual and Belief in Morocco* (1926) II, p. 349.

³⁵ J. Harrison, *Myths of Greece and Rome*, p. 37.

³⁶ Lucian, *De Syr. dea*, 49; Pausanias, VII, 18 12.

³⁷ L. Farnell, *Cults of the Greek States*, II, 444 ff.

³⁸ *Loc. cit.*, II, 505.

³⁹ R. Harris, *The Ascent of Olympus*, pp. 65, 80.

If this theory be sound we have an indication of the extremely ancient lineage of the mugwort cult for it would seem to have spread through Europe and Asia and to Mexico in the comparatively developed form in which a mugwort goddess is represented. Its association with thunder brings it into connexion with one of the very earliest of magical fertility conceptions, for thunder and rain-magic go together. This weed furnishes evidence supporting the view that primitive men were able to pass on ideas to one another around a great segment of the globe.